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# NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

No. DLXVI.

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JANUARY, 1904.

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## HERBERT SPENCER: A CHARACTER STUDY.

BY WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON.

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THE oft-quoted aphorism of Sir Henry Taylor, that "the world knows nothing of its greatest men," was very literally true in the case of the illustrious English philosopher who, the last of the splendid race of intellectual giants who gave glory to the Victorian Era, has just passed away at a ripe old age. Life moves rapidly in these days; and it is safe to say that, for the present generation, Herbert Spencer has been little more than a name. It is probable, indeed, that there will be many readers to whom the news of his death will cause surprise, mainly by bringing to them a sudden realization of the fact that till just now he was still alive.

Nor is it altogether astonishing that this should be so. Since the completion of his life-work, "The System of Synthetic Philosophy," some years ago, Spencer had dropped very largely out of sight, an occasional utterance through the newspapers, a brief paragraph here and there, alone reminding the world at large of his existence. His closing years were spent in an isolation almost monastic, and in the practical inactivity of slowly failing physical powers. All his life long, his constant ill-health, the enormous demands of the tremendous task which he had set

himself to accomplish, and to which he gave his whole energy with single-hearted devotion, and his pronounced horror of publicity had combined to keep him, as few men of his transcendent power and influence have been kept, out of the highways of existence; and his complete nervous collapse, a number of years since, with the removal of his home from London to Brighton which followed this, meant his almost total obliteration in the public mind. Hence the curious mystery in which, whatever may be said of the writer, the man himself has always remained enshrouded. There has been a little gossip now and then about his struggles, his invalidism, his various real or supposed eccentricities; but few have known anything really worth knowing about the personality and character of one who has impressed himself so deeply upon the life and thought of his age.

Better qualified than most men still living, through the privilege of long and intimate association with him, to speak of Herbert Spencer, the man, I had always been restrained, during his lifetime, from giving publicity to anything that might seem to him to imply even the slightest breach of confidence, by my knowledge of his extreme sensitiveness in this respect. But now that the embargo has been, to some extent, removed by his death, I feel that I can write more freely than I have ever done hitherto about him; though what I write will still be in the spirit of utter reverence towards the memory of the great teacher, whose friendship was an incalculable blessing to me, and whose influence has entered as a powerful formative factor into my own character and life.

From the photographs with which every reader is doubtless familiar, it will be seen that Spencer's face was a strikingly expressive one, with its strong frontal ridge, deep-set eyes, prominent nose and firmly cut mouth and jaw—the face, as you instantly saw, of a man marked out for intellectual leadership. The features which, however, arrested attention in particular (as again the portraits show) were the magnificent broad brow and high-domed head, which led many qualified observers to assert that Spencer's cranial development was the finest they had ever seen. In his case there was no such incongruity as sometimes exists between the man's appearance and his work. The one seemed to harmonize wholly with the other. One thing, however, would perhaps astonish you, as it astonished George Eliot. The forehead

of a great thinker is generally ploughed deep with the lines of thought. Spencer's was, to the end, as smooth as a child's, bearing no traces of his long years of intense intellectual strain. This was probably due, as he once suggested to me, to the fact that, instead of setting himself to puzzle out problems, he allowed his thoughts to evolve themselves naturally. It was also a little surprising that his long-continued ill-health appeared to have had so slight an effect outwardly upon him. His tall and rather gaunt figure was, almost to the last, wonderfully erect; his cheeks were always ruddy; his splendid voice, which would have been a fortune to an orator, retained its richness and resonance; his rather rare laugh, its deep-chested, musical quality. Few men in the eighties are as well preserved as he was; and it was difficult, in looking at him or listening to him, to believe that for half a century he had been, to a considerable extent, an invalid.

I well remember my first meeting with him at the Athenæum Club; and I refer to this now because the impression which he then made upon me (a very youthful and ardent student of his writings) was, I believe, the impression which he habitually made upon strangers. Devoted as was my admiration for him, I had to confess that he repelled me just a little. I found him a trifle cold, remote, difficult of access. Until you got to know him well, indeed, you were always burdened by the feeling that you were in the presence of a very great man; he seemed to stand on a plane altogether above and beyond you; you hardly knew how to get into touch with him. This was not in the least the result of any sort of assumption on his part of greatness or oracularity. No man could be more simple, more modest, more absolutely unassuming; and affectations of any kind were wholly alien to the complete clarity of his nature. But, somehow, the feeling was there all the same. He was by temperament exceedingly reserved in ordinary intercourse—I might almost say, shy. This lent his manner a certain suggestion of restraint, and I can well understand that those who met him only casually must have thought him rather chilly and unsympathetic. It was hard, at first, too, to feel quite at ease with him, because he seemed to compel one to be more cautious in one's utterances than one quite likes to be. I have seen it stated that his own talk was "like a book." This is scarcely true, for there was nothing bookish—nothing set, formal or pedantic—about his conversation. But you saw that he was

scrupulous about every detail; that he measured his speech to the exact fit of his meaning, and never indulged in our common habit of reckless and haphazard assertion; while his diction was marvelously chaste and accurate, his sentences finished and correct. I suppose all this challenged one, and made one rather uncomfortably solicitous about one's own intellectual and grammatical responsibilities. But you had only to get thoroughly accustomed to these peculiarities, and you realized that they were simply upon the surface. The seeming aloofness of the man disappeared, and you found beneath the reticence and the coldness which first troubled you a large, simple and eminently sympathetic nature.

That Spencer was always easy to get on with, I do not say. He was often irritable and sometimes quick of temper and of tongue. His judgment of men was occasionally severe; and he had so little tolerance of the foibles, prejudices and petty absurdities of everyday life that he now and then struck one as hard and even censorious. He set up an extremely high standard of conduct, and was outspoken in his condemnation of meanness, untruthfulness and trickery, of sordid ambitions and weak subserviency to the dictates of the social code. But it must be remembered that, unlike many moralists who make rigorous demands upon the integrity of others, he made demands equally rigorous upon himself. The severe standard by which he tested the conduct of his neighbors was the standard by which he governed his own life. I have met many morally great and noble men, but Herbert Spencer was, morally, the greatest and noblest man I have ever known. It is true that he lacked the warmth and expansiveness of more impulsive natures; and this deficiency might easily lead one to underestimate the depth, earnestness and sincerity of his character. But the better one knew him, the more one grew to understand and admire his quiet strength, his steadiness of ethical purpose and unflinching courage, the purity of his motives, his rigid adherence to righteousness and truth, and his exquisite sense of justice in all things. It was, perhaps, the principle of justice which was the ultimate rule of conduct with him. But, though he believed and taught that justice should take precedence of generosity and that reckless generosity is an unmixed evil, the claims of generosity were by no means overlooked by him. This was shown again and again, in my knowledge of him, by acts of practical sympathy with deserving people and worthy causes.

I return to what I have said about Spencer's frequent irritability, to remark that, as every one was aware who was much with him, this had its root directly in his physical condition. Overwork on his epoch-making "*Principles of Psychology*" (published in its original form in 1855) brought about a severe attack of nervous prostration, from which he never entirely recovered. He was, from that time on, a martyr to dyspepsia and insomnia in their most obstinate forms. I remember his once telling me that, from the period of his breakdown in middle life, he had never known what it was to enjoy a full, natural night's rest. Joining him for work in the morning, during the time of my constant association with him, I would commonly ask him how he had slept, and the best answer he ever had to give me was: "I had a very good night, for me. I slept four hours." The fearful wear and tear of such a condition of chronic indigestion and sleeplessness may be realized even by the robust; and the matter was made worse in his case, I am convinced, by his constant recourse to all sorts of soporifics, to which he had in the first instance been driven by sheer despair, and which he long employed in quantities which frequently caused his friends alarm. These drugs, while of course they did nothing towards the permanent alleviation of the insomnia, undoubtedly aggravated the digestive troubles, while the reaction following their use just as certainly increased the nervous depression and irritability. Another feature of the case, and a very distressing one, was the hypochondria which grew out of these conditions, and which, during the later years of his life, added to the invalid's actual sufferings a variety of imaginary ills. Again and again, physicians assured him that the great organs were all sound. He was never fully convinced, and he ultimately got into the habit of watching himself and his symptoms with a morbid curiosity and a minuteness the mental results of which may be readily conceived. Any discussion of Spencer's occasional petulance—and my special reason for dwelling on the subject now is, that reference is certain to be made to it—must properly be accompanied by the strongest emphasis upon the state of things I have described.

Here it may, perhaps, be well to speak of the famous Spencerian ear-stoppers, a more or less accurate account of which has from time to time found its way into the public press. The simple facts of the matter are these. Years ago, Spencer found that the effect

of following ordinary conversation became frequently too much for him; but he liked to have people about him, to watch the play of expression on their faces, to feel that, though he could not himself share much in the merriment, he was, as it were, a part of the normal and healthy social world. For this reason, he objected to withdrawal into solitude, and evolved a plan by which he might secure the partial isolation which he required. He had a circular spring made to go round the back of his head, and this carried pads which fitted firmly upon the ears, effectively deadening the noise about him, and reducing the surrounding chatter to a mere hum. I have often seen him, stretched at length upon his couch, follow with apparent interest the gossip over the afternoon tea-cups up to a certain point, and then, reaching under his pillow, draw forth and adjust his instrument, thus suddenly detaching himself from his environment. The effect of this movement with comparative strangers was always to cause an instant cessation of the conversation. But this was precisely what Spencer did not wish. "Go on talking," he would exclaim, with a quizzical look; "I can't hear what you are saying, you know!" I have known him, too, occasionally interrupt in this way a current of conversation directed immediately to him, and I have seen it stated that when he did this it was done and taken as a rebuff. My own experience was that it was always done good-humoredly; though I can quite appreciate the embarrassment of those who were thus unexpectedly checked in their efforts for the great philosopher's entertainment.

What I have just implied about Spencer's fondness for social intercourse may itself, perhaps, suffice to correct an apparently common misapprehension—that he was naturally somewhat of an ascetic or recluse. He was not so in the least, and the seclusion of so much of his life was a matter of necessity and not at all of choice. He was really of a sociable disposition, a thoroughly "clubbable" man, as Johnson would say; fond, when health permitted, of dining out; an admirable conversationalist and *raconteur*, with a capital sense of humor and a keen eye for the fun of even little things. I believe I am right in saying that, in earlier life, like his friend G. H. Lewes, he was a good hand at a comic song; but I got to know him too late to hear any of his performances in this line myself. He always scouted the notion that, because a man devoted his life to serious subjects, he should, there-

fore, be deemed superior to the ordinary pleasures of humanity. Nor was there anything puritanic about his general conception of existence. Though dyspepsia imposed restraints upon his own diet, he was a firm believer in the good things of the table, including those of potable character. And while he did not himself smoke, or did so only on the rarest occasions, he had not the slightest objection to the moderate use of the weed. As readers of his "Ethics" will remember, one of his main principles was a true temperance in all things, and this, like all his theories, was a matter of practice with him as well.

For many years, his main social outlet was at the Athenæum Club, where he was a very familiar figure. Cards he cared nothing about. He told me once that he had tried to learn whist, but had desisted on finding that he could never remember the plays, a consolation to some of us who have to confess the same inability. But he was very fond of billiards, which he played well; and he has more than once amused me by his accounts of spirited contests between himself and—of all people in the world—staid bishops of the English Church. His principal outdoor recreations in earlier life had been fishing in Scotland and quoits; but both of these he had been obliged to give up for many years before his death. It may surprise many to learn that he went but little to books for the purposes of relaxation. Ordinary works of imagination did not much interest him. Poetry of the highest class—Shakespeare, Keats and the finest parts of Tennyson, for example—he thoroughly enjoyed; but, save in the line of his work, he was not a reading man. While engaged on my book on Rousseau, I wrote asking him whether or not it were true, as has been so constantly alleged, that he was indebted to "*Émile*" for many of his own educational ideas. His reply was that at the time his "Education" was produced he had never even heard of "*Émile*," and that he had never read it since. General literature was for him an interest on the margin of life only. I remember, one winter at Brighton, reading some novels aloud to him in the long evenings, and how greatly he enjoyed "Humphrey Clinker," though on the whole Thackeray was clearly his favorite novelist. At another time, I read him several of Mr. W. D. Howells's stories, and he appreciated the delicate art of these, especially in the dialogue. But he was always very impatient of "padding," and when we came to long descriptions or analyses he would exclaim:



"Skip, skip!" One point especially to be remarked is that he did not take at all kindly to the admixture of philosophy with poetry and fiction. He thought Browning's method altogether wrong; and, while he deeply admired the earlier work of his intimate friend George Eliot, he considered her later writings far too scientific and didactic. But, while the lighter forms of literature thus yielded him only moderate pleasure, music was a never-failing source of satisfaction. He would listen hour after hour while one played to him from the compositions of the great masters, valuing expression, as might be anticipated, far above virtuosity. He had knowledge of music enough to make him a critical as well as responsive auditor; and, while his taste was fairly catholic, he returned habitually to the standard writers of the older school, like Handel and Bach, Beethoven and Gluck. Wagner he enjoyed in parts, but most of the modern composers he was accustomed to dismiss as clever technicians merely, lacking in true inspiration; and he was wholly indifferent to any music, no matter how brilliant, which seemed to him to want the note of genius—which, in a favorite phrase of his, struck him as simply "manufactured."

Spencer's habit was to work about three hours each morning. This represented, at best, the extreme limit of his power, and his labors were often interrupted by the enforced idleness of days or weeks. To economize his strength, he dictated everything, even his letters; and, save for corrections and interlineations, there is little of his manuscript which is written in his own hand. He himself believed that the employment of an amanuensis was a very real help to him, and he again and again advised friends to adopt his plan. How painfully slow, in such circumstances, the progress of his great work must have been will be evident, and the patience, courage and perseverance exhibited in the production of many thousand closely packed pages, in face of the difficulties imposed by chronic ill-health, financial losses and much personal discouragement, give a moral grandeur to his vast achievement upon which it is a pleasure and an inspiration to dwell.

It is, therefore, with sincere regret that I have to add that the completion of the "Synthetic Philosophy" in 1896 did not bring to him the keen satisfaction he might fairly have expected. The closing years of his life were, indeed, clouded with much sadness

and disappointment. Unmarried, without a single relative in the world, and with nearly all his older friends dead before him, he was at the last a solitary and pathetic figure. He had made comparatively little money by his fifty years of self-sacrifice and unremitting devotion to a great ideal. But this fact, I believe, was never considered by him. His depression arose from a different cause. Though when, after a long visit to America, I told him of the influence I found he was exerting there, he replied "I am satisfied," and though he spoke with pardonable pride of the translation of his books into many languages and the spread of his thought all over the world, there was one respect in which I know he was grievously disappointed. His political doctrines were all but unheeded; his Individualism was regarded as visionary. Socialistic ideas were daily growing more and more powerful. He saw, too, with profound apprehension and sorrow, unmistakable signs everywhere of reaction in religion, politics and society. The recrudescence of militarism, the temporary triumph of the cheap imperialists, the development of a sordidly materialistic spirit throughout the modern nations, and their abandonment of the principles of sanity and political righteousness, all these things cast a very black shadow over his declining path. I do not wonder that, as he looked back over his magnificent life-work, his mind should have been darkened by the doubt as to whether some of the truths to which he attached the greatest value might not, after all, have been set forth in vain.

WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON.